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penitentiary. They have a fine hewn stone Court house & are building a bank of the same material. They have a fine stone quarry in the neighbourhood. Where I put up it is 40 ms. to Ann Arbour 80 to Detroit & 28 to Marshall.

LETTERS OF GEORGE B. SMITH⁵

Dear J.

CHICAGO, March 24th, 1843

We arrived here yesterday all in good health and spirits. We have had a long & tedious journey. The weather has been extremely cold most of the time since we left home, a circumstance by the way which has been greatly to our advantage—indeed but for this fact, it must have been impossible for us to have proceeded. We had as you know 2 double wagons, & two single carriages all of which were heavy loaded and if we had had the weather usual to this season of the year the roads would have been soft & we would have been forced to have sold many of our things. It was unwise in us to have started as we did—but the unprecedented length of the cold weather let us out. It commenced snowing two or three days after we left, and continued to snow for several days. For this reason the roads were heavy for a few days, & we made but slow progress each day—however we got along as you see very well & we are here in good time. We were 16 days on the road.

I will not attempt to give you a detailed history of our daily life on the way, or any kind of a description of the country or villages through which we have passed. The weather has been so cold & some of the time so blustering, that I have not paid much attention to the country. I have looked only to the road & I assure you it has oftentimes required some care to keep that. We passed through Michigan and one corner of Indiana, & I cannot tell how the country would look in its summer garments, but I assure you it looks uncomfortable enough in its winter robes—but I do not intend to describe to you the country—indeed for the reasons I have stated—my description would be but poor if I tried.

I will however give you a slight idea of the people & a few miles of the country through Indiana. I do this because here for

⁵ These letters were written to his friend James Sargent.

certain reasons I noticed the country & scrutinised the people with more minuteness than elsewhere on my route. The section of Indiana through which we passed is regard[ed] in some respects a dangerous route. I mean that portion of it say 40 miles the other side of Michigan City. This city is about 40 miles from Chicago.

Somewhere in the neighborhood alluded to lives the notorious Bill Lathy [?] formerly of Lathys corners, in Summit Co. & he is supposed to be the head & captain of a gang of horse thieves & counterfeiter[s]—& hereabouts they live. We were warned to be on our guard in passing through this country. We had 6 very fine horses & some valuables besides—which under existing circumstances we could not well afford to loose. We tried to pass this infested district in one day, but the roads were so heavy from the depth of snow that night overtook us midway the distance, & we were forced to stop at what we had been told was a kind of headquarters for the scamps thereabouts. This was a low rakish dirty looking building, with a rickety sign in front on which was lettered, “Tavern.” We drove up to the door, & out came Mr. Landlord. I wish you could have seen him—with his red bushy hair—his big bloated face & this by bad whiskey—which abounds in this neighborhood, & which is commonly called “red eye,” literally dripping from his eyes—which were “red eyes” in truth. He was indifferently dressed yet fantastically, he had on a bright red vest much worn, a pair of green & red striped pantaloons and a big dirty green beige [word illegible] tied by the ends in front, & right at his heels were two big bull dogs that looked fierce & ugly enough—but not so bad as their master.

He said we could stay—he “sposed” whereupon we commenced to unload ourselves, & the little portable traps that we took in with us nightly when we stopped. We hardly commenced this unloading process when out came 5 or 6 of “Mine Hosts” croneys. I will not undertake to describe these characters to you. I will say however, that they reminded me of as many big black snakes, in a kind of half torpid state. Each man looked his part well. Of course we took them to be horse thieves, & our fears were excited that they might have been promoted to the higher

degrees of crime for they certainly looked as if they were ripe for "treason stratagem & murder."

We would have gladly left this place, but stay we must. We determined therefore to pass a sleepless night in that house, & we did. At first they would have placed us in rooms distant from each other, but we declined this arrangement & succeeded in getting two rooms adjoining—Father & Mother & Charles & Lafayette occupied one room & Parsons & I another. Our room looked out to the barn. We each had a big hickory cane & a Pistol; we watched the barn & listened intently all the night long in constant fear that some evil was to befall us. Once or twice during the night we thought we heard some unusual stir in the house & about the barn—but the morning and a bright beautiful cold morning it was—found us as safe from harm as if we had been lodged in a Princely Palace—save that we were wearied from watching. Our horses were all safe & they had been well cared for. A comfortable breakfast was prepared for us and about 9 A. M. we left the place where our fears had been so excited & I must say that all of the inmates of the house looked better to us than they did the night before. I have thought of the matter since, & I must do those rough fellows the justice to say that in estimating them we rather reasoned from our fears—they were rough looking men to be sure & what we heard excited our fears & we looked at these men with a distorted vision—at all events they did not molest us & in the morning they all seemed kind & obliging & the landlord assisted us with a will & a grace that would have done honor to "Mine Host" of a more elegant establishment.

We left them there thankful at least that our horses had not been stolen & that we had been permitted to depart in peace.

The country for about 20 miles either side of Michigan City looked to me rough & uninviting, the people all along the way looked rough & inhospitable, and I am inclined to think that this is really the true character of the country & the people in this vicinity. We arrived at Michigan City just at dusk. I will tell you about this place—a few words in my next.

Dear J.—

CHICAGO, March 28th, 1843

I said in my last that I would tell you in a few words about Michigan City & a few words will tell all about it. This is the

only point that Indiana has on Lake Michigan, and if the harbor was at all good or could conveniently be made so, it would be in time a very important point, & something of a city but the harbor is full of sand, and already a large amount of money has been expended here by the Government to remove the sand & make a harbor but the most sanguine are disheartened at the prospect, for the sand drifts in about as fast as they can take it out. The whole city looks just as if the houses had been built somewhere else & moved here—and indeed this is true of many of them. A rival city was started a few miles from here in 1836, it busted & the houses many of them have been removed here.

The tavern house where we are stopping a large wood building was so moved, & it now stands on blocks imbedded in the sand. The city is on a sand Bank. There may be 12 or 15 hundred people here, & in the summer I should think most of their time would be occupied in keeping the sand out of their eyes. In short it is a cheerless dillapidated looking place, & I would rather live anywhere else than here. We got there in the evening at dusk & left at daylight the next morning, & right glad I was to get away. Still there will always be a “City” there & many a poor devil will be dumped into the sand after he has shuffled off his mortal coil.

The Road from Michigan City to Chicago hugs very close to the shore of the head of Lake Michigan & is consequently very sandy, but just now in its frozen state the road is good. The country along the route looks barren enough, & yet people have settled here & opened farms, & seem quite contented. It is well we do not all think alike. I would rather not live at all than to be obliged to spend my allotted days in this region, at least it seems so to me now.

This day we got within six or 7 miles of Chicago. Here Father found an old acquaintance keeping tavern in a long double log house & everything was very comfortable about it—the name I have forgotten, but as Toots says “its no consequence.” Here we staid all night, all the next day & night, for the wind blew so that we could not proceed.

We kept close to the shore of the lake quite into Chicago & most of the way it is prairie. To the left of us which is south, this

[is] one vast sea of Prairie, as they say here we were out of site of land—and withall it is very low, not much above the level of the Lake—but in the summer when the grass is green & the flowers are in bloom, it must look beautiful for they tell me that in the summer the prairie is literally covered with beautiful flowers of many varieties—but now it looks cheerless & gloomy enough & here I would not stay.

We arrived in this city March 23d & we are stopping at the American Temperance House kept by C. W. Cook. He formerly kept the Cleveland House at Cleveland, where I boarded with him. The weather is still cold & sleighing good the snow is so deep between here & Wisconsin that we cannot proceed. We may stay here 3 or 4 weeks—at all events I will write you again in a few days, when I will tell you about this “far off” City.

Dear J.—

CHICAGO April—1843

I promised in my last to tell you about this City. There is a wide expanse of sparsely settled country between us, which on the whole is capable of maintaining a dense & prosperous population, and all around Chicago there is a fine but yet uncultivated country, and yet Chicago is a city now much larger than Cleveland, with a business many fold greater than is done at that place. It is situated just at the head of Lake Michigan & on ground that seems scarcely above the lake, and now that spring begins to unfold its beauties, and Jack frost is leaving for parts unknown, we begin to feel as well as see that this great city in embryo is in a mud hole. The name denotes either a mud hole or sckunks den & I am not certain which. The Indians are remarkably cute in giving the right name to anything. Nevertheless it is a city—a thriving, prosperous busy city—it is just beginning to recover from the effect of the bubble of 1836—at which time the prices of property were perfectly fabulous but the traces of those days are fast passing away & a healthy & profitable state of things reigns here instead. The prices of property are not high for the business advantages and future prospects of the place, for notwithstanding it is in the mud it must from its very situation be in time a City of very considerable business & large population.

There are men here, sensible reflecting men who affect to believe that in a few years it will be one of the great cities of the Union. They are men who have an abiding faith in the growth & prosperity of what they call the "Great Northwest." You never heard much about it nor I either until now, and they regard Chicago as the Great Commercial Center of the Great West—perhaps they are right. We shall see.

Father has rented a house on Clark St not far from the main st of the city which is Water St,⁶ & we shall stay here 3 or 4 weeks until the roads become settled so that we can jog on to Southport⁷ Racine Co Wisconsin our place of destination.

I would like to stop here, but Father is not so inclined, and I must not leave him yet—his health is improving, still he is but the wreck of a man, & I must not leave him. My health has greatly improved since I left home, but still it is poorly & I am not more able to apply myself to my profession, & I have fears that I may never be able to do so, but I will not dwell upon a subject so painful to me & in no wise interesting to you. I have written today to E—— & enclose the same to you please see that it is delivered. I shall hereafter write directly to E——. I will write again in few days.

Dear J.—

CHICAGO April 1843

We are still here waiting for the snow to go off & the roads to settle, so that we can move on to Wisconsin. The snow is slowly melting away but the roads are horrid, even the streets of Chicago are almost impassible. Our people are all well but we are all impatient to leave here & be settled in our future home.

My health I think is improving, and it has been from the day I left. I now look forward with some hope of being able to perform a part in the great world, for a while I feared that my time was short, then my ambition was correspondingly weak, but now a light glimmers in the future & hope revives. I pray that it may not be a delusion.

While waiting here we have but little to do. I have nothing to do, but read the newspapers. J. Y. Sanger you may remember

⁶ This was South Water Street, then the business center of Chicago.

⁷ Modern Kenosha.

him has a hat & cap store here, & he is also interested in business in Milwaukee Wisconsin. I repair to his store every day to read the newspapers of that state, several of which he takes. I feel more interest in these papers, because Wisconsin is to be my future home, and besides there is a very interesting contest going on there just now between the Gov. James D. Doty, and the Legislature. The Legislature & the people all seem to be against Doty, but Doty seems to be ahead.

The difficulty as I gather it is this—The Legislature met without being called by the Gov. & he refused to cooperate with them, because he says that Congress has not made an appropriation for that purpose. The Legislature undertook to go on without him, & although almost every member is against the Gov. they make very bad work in their opposition—somehow he contrives to head them at every turn. There is great excitement there & some here about it. I cannot learn enough to decide which is right, though I can clearly see that the Gov is ahead. All of the papers that I read are against the Governor & they abuse him roundly, & I hear that the people are against him too, but I don't know how that is. There is no party politics in the matter that I can learn, but it is Doty and anti Doty, & Doty is ahead. I will keep track of the fight & tell you how it comes out.